

**Summary of
Meeting of the Taunton Bay Advisory Group
6 PM Tuesday December 18th
Hancock Town Office
Facilitated Sherman Hoyt**

Present: Sherman Hoyt, Norman Hodgkins, Lee Hudson, Shep Erhart, Doug Kimmel, Steve Perrin, Claire Enterline, Slade Moore, Antonio Blasi, and John Sowles.

Public Comment

Sherman noted that no members of the public were present to comment. The agenda moved to approval of last meeting summary.

Meeting Summary

In the last summary, Sowles' phone number was wrong.

Norman asked that his comment be rephrased to how many years "fished" in Taunton Bay, not lived in or around the bay.

Shep clarified that he has harvested in Taunton Bay for 35 years and that the biomass estimates should be 50,000 wet pounds and that he took out ~13,000 wet pounds.

Members asked that Sowles expand and clarify for the record the distinction between technical rules versus major substantive rules.

We discussed how the meeting summaries are corrected and recorded. One school of thought is that minutes need to be accurate for what was actually said. The other school thought this was not necessary. Doug suggested that, by consensus, we can change what is in summary to better reflect or clarify what was intended rather than what was actually said. If need a parenthetical, then ok. Steve said brackets are more appropriate. John mentioned that he was not attempting to make these a transcript but rather an overview of what transpired.

Lee followed with an example that the mussel industry was more involved than what was discussed last month. She said that the boat is paid based on the weight of processed mussels, those mussels that are actually marketable, not the culls and substandard mussels. In past, those harvested above bridge were 100% process. Waste goes to landfill or to fertilizer etc. The second part of the value is based on meat count. The processed mussels are cooked, blended and weighed. The price is higher for mussels with more meat. [As explained by Lee – "The method used by processors on shore to purchase 'raw' (from the boat) mussel product is by the weight of the finished product; 5000 lbs landed at 50% would mean that the other 50% is discarded (shells, broken mussels, over/undersized, bycatch) during processing. The typical mussel boat these days is landing anywhere between 50-70% product. I have heard report of as low as 30-50% this past summer when very few harvest areas were available - what a shame. This is the "percentage" referred to by which harvesters are paid by the pound for the mussels. By the way, FBF produced a 100% product on the water with no waste landed!

The 'meat weight' that is the percentage of cooked meat weight/total shell-on uncooked weight (mw/sw.) I would sample X pounds, weigh them, cook them, shuck them and weigh the meats. A mussel meat weight would range between 10 - 30% depending on seasonality, environmental conditions, etc. I would estimate the current industry average at low-to-mid range which is down from historical averages.]

Sherm asked how this impacts the dragging plan. Lee said it effects who will fish there. Steve would prefer email corrections.

The group approved using brackets to elaborate or explain further what was actually said.

Sherman asked that everyone please complete Frank's matrix.

Dragging Plan

Sherman pointed out that the DMR plan was comprehensive but we need to address what follows moratorium. The dragging plan is only phase one of that larger plan.

Antonio announced that Senator Raye had introduced a bill to allow municipalities to regulate intertidal dragging. John briefly explained Senator Raye's bill [see LD 2006] as well as DMR's counterproposal [see LD 1958] that was based a pilot project done by the Gouldsboro Shellfish Committee.

Slade asked if there are harvestable mussels in the proposed drag area and did we intend to allow dragging in the intertidal area of it. John said that he doesn't know and was hoping harvesters would provide that local knowledge. He said he's been disappointed harvesters have not engaged more in this plan, that after all was designed, in part, to accommodate their needs. He also said that if it is not clear in the DMR proposal and it is the group's will, they can recommend a restriction on intertidal dragging in the designated area.

Regarding how to move the plan forward, Slade asked that the group put this in ecosystem context to protect ecosystem functions. Ecosystem based management is our mandate, after all. Ecosystem management might sound be too big to understand or grapple with, but we can make progress towards this end by identifying some system components/dynamics (we'll never understand all of them) that are important to ecosystem function, can be monitored, and finally, influenced through management to achieve our mandated purpose. Steve wants to devote more study to various ecosystem questions before moving ahead with dragging. Lee wants to zone area for alternate uses. Lee believed that, we have more information than other areas and enough to begin. John reminded people we can begin with what we have and change as new information becomes available. We already know there are important components that we want to preserve. Slade was not sure we had enough information to begin. He questioned whether the mussel stock data needed to develop the dragging portion of the overall plan is stale. He also questioned whether we have any reliable data indicating what level of scallop and urchin harvesting could be sustained by benthic communities. Slade outlined several key tasks he believed could move the plan forward responsibly. First he suggested clearly articulating what sensitive areas/resources we know of in the Bay. He

believed some areas of concern are addressed in the Draft Comprehensive Management Plan, but as part of this new phase of planning, we could consider using available data to map these areas as a matter of transparency and so the decision making process can be clearly tracked and evaluated. First identification of areas that we think should be off limits to dragging should occur since dragging may represent the greatest immediate risk to these resources. He circled the two isolated horseshoe crab populations in Egypt and Hog bays as an example. Eelgrass once dominated the bay but with its decline, we now need to limit scope of disturbance. Most of the bay's subtidal flats could be zoned for eelgrass, which would limit the amount of certain types of activities that hinder/prevent eelgrass growth. We also need to do stock assessments of areas to be harvested, including on mussels, urchins, and scallops and we have to consider diver harvesting of these last two species, because they may be ongoing and could suppress recolonization of stocks that were depleted in the 1990s. Once we know where they are and status we can zone them for appropriate use. Lee said having to do stock assessments upfront rather than as harvest was taking place, would put small operator out of business and into large operators' hands. She stated that the areas had good mussels and that Slade's drag impact experiment site in 2002-2003 was picked based on there being commercially valuable mussels. Slade told the group that the area immediately to the southeast of the Burying Island Bar had the greatest density of marketable mussels (not the study site) at the time of the experiment – this area was hand raked for mussels after the experiment. Lee felt sure that there were still market quality mussels in that area for harvesting.

Steve proposed that we need to study the system and understand the system before doing anything or opening anything up to dragging. Doug asked why we are talking only or mostly about mussels. Someone remarked that it was because that is all that is left to harvest by drag. Urchins and scallops are not abundant enough. Doug wondered if we have become confused over what the problem is. Norm mentioned that he knows of a harvester who has done a survey in the proposed zone. The area is so-so for mussels, but scallops and urchins cleaned up by divers. He thought the area between Burying Is and Falls has been left alone by divers for 2-3 years. Mussels are being dragged below bridge now. To clarify where we were on the subject, Doug recapped the discussion. We need to look at zones and identify those attributes that need to be protected.

Slade asked that the group to 1) keep maintenance of ecosystem function in forefront of all our discussions and actions. 2) identify and delineate ecological resources 3), conduct stock assessments on species that are under pressure and 4) manage the harvest of any surplus.

Steve noted that the devil is in the details and that activity in the intertidal area of the drag area needs to be explicit. He handed out his concerns, thoughts and proposals. His approach is similar but rooted in Taunton Bay, not only ecosystem based management principles [the handouts appended]. In the big picture, we need to deal with mussels, scallops and urchins. In some cases, dragging and diving led to commercial extinction of scallops and urchins in short order by few people. We could repeat this easily again. We are charged with sustainable harvest. We need to look at mussel beds, identify who lives in them, who eats mussels such as the population of diving ducks (greater scaup, bufflehead, surf scoters, goldeneye) and lobsters. Mussels and eelgrass live together.

Both play roles in cleaning or keeping the water clean. He mentioned that Chris Flanagan, for example, had found mussel shells 15ft down in mud. Steve believes mussel bars stabilize and keep channels in tact. Worries we are removing the retaining wall. He monitors for sea level rise and thinks he is saw increasing erosion last year as a result of storms.

In reaction to Steve's recommendation to limit fishing activity to trapping, Norm pointed out that urchins can't be trapped and that the State already has size limit to prevent over harvest. Steve asked how to enforce this when he sees illegal sized scallops in the market.

Slade asked about Recommendation #3, that limits harvest to aquaculture harvests. Steve said suspended rope aquaculture is the way to go in Taunton Bay because the alternative, dragging, produces too much turbidity. He prefers to take a precautionary approach.

John said that if the group thought the area proposed as the designated dragging zone was excessive, then we could recommend buoying off the sensitive parts such as the lip of the channel or intertidal. He also said, that he had proposed to use the harvest as a way to answer some of these questions.

Slade asked if there another area to designate that would be better, such as the bar end of Butler Pt. Norm thought not but that between Butler Pt. and Burying Is. there are mussels. Unfortunately, that doesn't work either since it is an area of concentrated horseshoe crab activity.

Lee handed out her draft 3 part matrix [appended] that was modeled after the Maine Seaweed Council matrix. She had filled in the DMR recommendations and species. No changes to industry and requested that we fill in the boxes. Lee will email the matrix to everyone. She also suggested a facilitated session to refine matrix. Steve asked Lee where does ecosystem based management fit in her plan. Lee replied that it overshadows everything. She likes the matrix because it ties everything together. Steve wants it all integrated to support an action.

Sherm asked how the group felt about doing this as homework. Is it fair to ask more of the group's time? . Steve thinks the matrix misses ecosystem function. Slade was asked to integrate ecosystem function into the species matrix that Lee put together. He agreed, noting that our knowledge of functions in the Bay is at this time mostly qualitative so expect general information on linkages, interactions, and processes that can help steer management but won't deliver precise management prescriptions (e.g. remove X amount of eelgrass = X amount reduction in juvenile fish. Doug suggested we don't need to be comprehensive and this will serve as just guidance.

Shep asked about the timeline for the group's recommendations to the Commissioner. John said we don't have to come up with recommendation at next meeting but that the sooner the better. Worst case, the DMR will go to public hearing with its proposal and the group can testify with its recommendations then. However, the purpose and mission of the group is to advise beforehand so the proposal at the hearing is supported. Shep

likes the holistic approach here but wondered how we integrate people who make a living from the bay and how do they put something back into the very system that they take out of. Can we involve fishermen more so they are part of solution and good management? It would be nice to get them to buy into returning something for taking out of bay. Slade asked about the possibility of setting aside lease sites for harvest. Shep will put his ideas in the matrix.

Lee noted that there are many other ecosystem base projects and will send out a reading list on ecosystem based management. We also need to define what we mean by “sustainability.”

The next meeting was scheduled for January 15th.

Meeting Adjourned at 8:30